

THE HAGIOGRAPHY OF THE SIKHS

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INTRODUCTION: THEMES IN INDIAN HAGIOGRAPHY

Scholarship on the religious literature of Indian tradition has usually, unsurprisingly, focussed its main attention on the primary texts themselves. In recent years, however, a renewed interest has grown in the contextual literature through which these primary texts are interpreted. On the one hand lie the various categories of commentaries which seek to present a text in a certain light, often going to lengths of semantic contrivance that would astonish the original authors; on the other hand are the various kinds of biographical writings whose varied purposes centre on a desire to find inspiration and authority in the actual or imagined life-stories of the revered authors themselves. Such 'biographies' typically contain elements of the fantastic such as miracles and a variety of chronological implausibilities offensive to the historical basis of objective research principles; such ostensibly 'biographical' writing has often, in consequence, been dismissed out of hand as a tedious impediment to verifiable historiography. More recent research on this literature, however, sees it as addressing and revealing facets of belief and attitude which, though at some remove from historical actuality, lie at the very heart of the traditions that they represent; and indeed this literature allows us to understand more fully not only the nature of the traditions being studied but also the mechanics whereby they propagate themselves. The papers in this volume are intended to contribute to the study of this area of religious literature which, as several of the contributors make clear, has largely remained unexplored.

A feature of the study of religious biography is the gulf separating the traditional scholarship of the *paṇḍita* from the critical scholarship of objective research methods: the one is characteristically *reverential*, intending to locate the life-stories of its subjects in a sweep of time knowing no boundaries between the contemporary and the ahistorical; the other is characteristically *referential*, intending to dissect the available data and show how the various

parts relate to each other in a strictly chronological time-frame. Thus there are two conflicting ways of understanding the process whereby a tradition grows and develops: the devotee will see the process as one of revelation, while the critic will see it as a process of invention¹ — and there is little possibility of compromise between these two positions, each held with equal vehemence.

Biographical writing in the context of Indian religions is now dubbed 'hagiography', a term borrowed from the Christian context on the assumption that the writers, sectarian leaders and other religious figures of Indian tradition treat belong to that awkwardly articulated category of 'poet-saints'. Following the *bhaktamāl* genre, the subjects of Indian hagiography may better be termed *bhakta*, 'devotee', since the imputation of an honorary 'sainthood' implied by the other term would in many cases sit ill on the shoulders of these often modest seekers of the divine. Parallels with Christianity², beguiling as ever in the field of Indian religion, constitute a distinct field of study hardly touched on in the present volume, whose contributors are concerned rather to analyse the development and purpose of Indian hagiographies in terms of the traditions from which they themselves derive. The aim of this introductory paper is to bring together some of the main themes which emerge from the papers that follow.

Although the intentions of the hagiographical texts discussed here are diverse in the extreme, some common patterns do emerge. We may start from Mahipati's candid observation, quoted by S.G. Tulpule, that 'what [hagiographers] sought in writing about the lives of saints was their company, *satsaṅga*' (p. 166). This purpose stands alongside the expression of other hagiographical ideals such as didactic instruction, the benefits of a spiritual life, charity, the grace of God, the merit of praise, the example of conversion stories, the certain rewards earned by pious service and endowment, and the efficacy of composing and singing hagiographical works. Some element of a search for closeness or communion with the charismatics of the past is certainly a common element, although

1 The two approaches have tended to be thought of as 'Indian' and 'western' respectively, but since Indian scholarship has increasingly adopted the critical approach, and the western initiates of Indian sects the reverential, such simplistic categories are no longer satisfactory.

2 The appropriateness or otherwise of the term 'hagiography' in the Indian context has been discussed by Steven Rosen in his introduction to *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies* vol. 1 (1993) No. 2, pp. 1-2.

hagiographers are rarely content simply to facilitate a retrospective *darśana* of their subject; their own agenda invariably involves a certain interpretative element which controls, directs or otherwise manipulates the reader's perception of the tradition. Hagiographers variously intend to correct, reinterpret, subsume, authenticate or legitimize the writings of their forebears. 'Seeking company' is itself an activity with a specific purpose: it serves to erode the distinction between the puranic and the contemporary, and it is a commonplace of hagiography — especially that of the inclusive *bhaktamāl* genre — that devotees from contemporary periods (whether modern or medieval) rub shoulders with saints and sages whom historical analysis would designate as 'mythological'. Even when authors or compilers insert formal rubrics to separate out the various historical periods (at least in terms of *yugas*), the clear implication of such texts is that the significance of human activity penetrates the divine realm, and vice versa.

There exists a paradox here: for whereas *bhaktas* characteristically insist on the subservience of the individual to the service of an undifferentiated supreme deity, thereby transcending the relevance of the details of individual mortal lives, the lay follower typically adopts the *bhakta's* life as an exemplary paradigm, and thereby naturally develops a close interest in the details of his life-story. This interest grows with time, and the late hagiographical sources of a tradition are usually more detailed than the early ones (which might naïvely have been expected, being chronologically closer to their subjects, to reflect the more accurately 'remembered' record). As Philip Lutgendorf has shown so dramatically in the case of Tulsīdās, hagiography abhors a vacuum, and the modest, indifferent or disinterested silence of *bhaktas* in respect of their own life-stories is vociferously filled by the clamour of later tradition. A concern for and interest in the details of a revered person's history is entirely natural and needs no explanation by reference to cultural conditioning; but a catalyst here must be the tendency for apotheosis to occur with particular spontaneity in the Indian setting. Modern examples include the Mahatma-hood of M.K. Gandhi, and even the symbolic equivalence more recently sought and found between 'Indira' and 'India'; if the political example seems irreverent it is far from irrelevant, since the paramountcy of the leader is equally conspicuous in religion and in politics (*līḍarī* in Hindi), and Indian respect for the principle of hierarchy ensures maximum attention being paid to the charismatic apex of the pyr-

amid in both contexts. The same process legitimises the principle of sectarian or theological authority being vested in a well-defined *paramparā* (which in the Hindu tradition tends to be safely brahmanical) and in the unchallenged status of its priesthood. Hagiography within the 'Puṣṭimārg' or Vaishnava sect of Vallabhācārya, for example, is shown by Richard Barz to stress at every opportunity the essential role of the guru as intermediary between the lay devotee and the divine: the devotee's access to Kṛṣṇa, and (surprisingly) vice versa, can only be assured through an initiation which the guru alone can bestow. Control of the lay following of the sect is also maintained in the field of religious literature: in making sectarian lore available to a lay readership or audience through the medium of a vernacular narrative, the still-brahmanical tradition simultaneously ensures that the democratically inclusive nature of *bhakti* is carefully kept within limits.

That same tradition of Vallabhācārya provides one of the most striking examples of an interconnection between hagiography and the transmission of sectarian texts. The hagiography of Sūrdās, the most celebrated vernacular poet of the Vallabha Sampradāy, provides well-known biographical features such as Sūr's blindness, his 'conversion' to Vallabha's sectarian attitude, and — most significantly — his composition of an impressively massive corpus of devotional verse. Many of his *padas* are woven into the narrative of the hagiography, which thereby provides a narrative contextualisation for these individual stanzas. What is significant here is the *interdependency* of the poetic corpus (the *Sūrsāgar*) and the hagiography (the *Vārtā* texts): for acceptance of the *Vārtā* as a historically valid chronicle rests on the attribution of the *Sūrsāgar* to Sūrdās, while conversely a belief in the authenticity of the *Sūrsāgar* will authenticate the narrative of the hagiography in which *Sūrsāgar* poems appear. To question the validity of either the poetic corpus or the hagiography is to undermine the very foundations on which the other element rests.

Objective historical research in this area threatens traditionally accepted and cherished views of sectarian tradition: recent research on Sūrdās³, for example, not only questions every major component of the traditional biographical narrative but also suggests that the

³ J.S. Hawley, *Sūr Dās: poet, singer, saint* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1984); and R.S. McGregor, *Hindi literature from its beginnings to the nineteenth century* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984), pp. 76-80.

corpus of verse reliably attributable to the historically obscure poet is a mere fraction of the received text. (Meanwhile, the majority of traditional 'Sūrdās' scholarship proceeds undeterred on the basis of the received text and the traditional biography.) Such an observation is hardly designed to endear researchers to the custodians of the tradition, who are often quick to perceive a threat to the status quo. Such a situation is further exacerbated when episodes from a religious heritage become the model for the contemporary identity of a sect or community, as in the case of the Sikhs discussed by W.H. McLeod⁴, and a real tension often exists between the opposed priorities of sectarian identity and academic research. The writing of *guru caritra* is such a sacred process that the resultant text may reach its own apotheosis: Tony Stewart reports that manuscripts of the *Caitanya caritāmṛta* have been known to be installed as icons in shrines⁵. When hagiography itself attains such lofty status, a critical appraisal of its contents becomes difficult for the sectarian, and dangerous for the outsider. In the context of the Sikh tradition, McLeod observes that even an 'educated' Sikh view of the *janam-sākhī* tradition holds that stripping away some of the unbelievable miraculous stories on the life of Gurū Nānak will reveal a stratum of authentic biography underneath; McLeod disputes this view, holding that the *janam-sākhīs* are by their very nature hagiographic, in that their significance is in their providing an interpretation – not an historical chronicle – of the Gurū's life.

If hagiography concentrates the reader's attention on the personality of a *bhakta*, it does so in order to propagate a singular interpretation of that individual's teaching. A prime purpose of hagiography is its deep vein of competition in which the superiority of one sect, tradition or lineage over another is strongly asserted; the context may be either inter-sectarian (as in the Tamil *Periya purāṇam*, analysed by Indira Peterson, in which the ideology of Tamil culture is strongly espoused), or intra-sectarian (as in the records of individual monastic lineages within medieval Jainism, discussed by Phyllis Granoff). In asserting the paramountcy of a particular teaching, the hagiographer must firstly demonstrate a reassuringly secure connection with pre-existing tradition (if not

4 McLeod further discusses the problems of non-Sikh scholarship on Sikh traditions in 'The study of Sikh literature', in *Studying the Sikhs: issues for North America*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Gurinder Singh Mann, New York: State University of New York, pp. 47-68.

5 Stewart, this volume p. 229.

exactly 'orthodox', the implied theology must not reach out too far from a normative acceptability), while secondly showing that the sectarian attitude being promoted offers a uniquely correct perception of divine truth. It is frequently stressed that the novelty in an espoused teaching is not a deviation from established beliefs, but rather an extension beyond them: hence the commonplace portrayal in hagiographies of the infant *bhakta's* enviably precocious command of an entire standard corpus of traditional texts, and a complete mastery of its wisdom. Building on this incontrovertibly authoritative basis of traditional knowledge, the hagiography's subject must then be shown to be imbued with *viveka*, that faculty of true discretion which allows him to separate the essence from the inessential and thus to become an exemplar for the devotee.

* * *

The Sikh *janam-sākhī* tradition has a particular urgent relevance for our understanding of the contemporary presentation of Sikhism both in India and in the diaspora. W.H. McLeod, more than any other scholar outside the Panth, has taken up the often difficult challenge of attempting an honest but diplomatic study of an area steeped in controversy; his paper in this volume gives an account of the main features of Sikh hagiography, alluding also to the difficulties involved in their study from an external perspective. He traces the development in the hagiographic texts from accounts of the first Gurū, Gurū Nānak, to those of the tenth and last of the personal Gurūs, Gurū Gobind Singh, showing how each of these two key figures in particular contributed a discrete and distinctive aspect to the character of the Panth. The continuing popularity of the *janam-sākhīs*, and of derived genres such as Sikh poster art, is shown to be an influential channel of Panthic identity. The common understanding of the texts as being literal chronicles of the lives of their subjects has already been alluded to above: McLeod points out that the interpretation of Gurū Nānak's life that the texts intend to convey is that 'Nānak is the one who reveals the path to liberation and all who desire it must become his humble followers... This, indeed, is the nature of all hagiography.'

This last observation certainly holds true for the Vallabhite hagiographies discussed by Richard Barz, even if the character of the Vallabha Sampradāy, and the purpose of its hagiology, is very different from those of the Sikh parallels. In the Vallabhite case,

the vernacular texts have a particular function as a channel through which the Sanskrit teachings of Vallabhācārya himself are made accessible to an actively proselytised lay following ignorant of the classical language. The *Vārtās* provide, through the example of early devotees, a manual of sectarian precept and practice, and (as already indicated) contextualise the Hindi lyric hymns which form so conspicuous a part of the sectarian legacy. Though the titles of the two *Vārtā* collections, 'Accounts of the 84 Vaishnavas' and 'Accounts of the 252 Vaishnavas' designate the disciples of Vallabh and his son Viṭṭhalnāth respectively, the concentration of the texts is actually tripersonal, telling of the relationship between Kṛṣṇa, guru, and disciple; and the reader of the text is left in no doubt as to the centrality of the guru's role in facilitating the flow of grace from Kṛṣṇa. A particular recension of the '84 Vaishnavas' text with extensive commentary has become, in Barz's words, 'the primary scripture for ordinary use in the Vallabh Sampradāy'. This furnishes the clearest example of the function of hagiography in tandem with textual commentary as a means of propagating a sectarian ideology; and the concept whereby the mortal devotee has a parallel, supramundane existence in Kṛṣṇa's *Golok* is — to borrow a phrase from Indira Peterson's paper — an example of the hagiographers' goal of 'imaging the ideal community'.

Characterised by Nābhādās as 'a Vālmīki for the Kali age', the Hindi poet Tulsīdās is a natural subject for hagiography: that a detailed biography should now exist, to the full satisfaction of devotees of the 'Hindi Rāmāyaṇ' for whom Tulsī is himself the exemplary *bhakta*, is therefore not in the least surprising. What is of interest is the manner in which that biography has been assembled over the centuries, the allusive references of Nābhā's notoriously enigmatic *Bhaktamāl* being gradually expanded into a full-fledged life story replete with anecdotal detail. Successive layers of creative invention on the part of Tulsī's hagiographers (egged on by the faithful, for whom questions of 'authenticity' are meaningless) are peeled away by Philip Lutgendorf, whose paper on the expansion of the Tulsī hagiography locates that process in the context of social changes taking place during the period of the hagiography's creation. The first part of Lutgendorf's paper having traced the historical development of '*Tulsī carit*', the second shows how the public and scholarly perception of the *Rāmcaritmānas* and its author have undergone a gradual transformation, being initially looked at askance by the Sanskritic tradition because of its

vernacular character, but later becoming representative of the highest aspirations of that tradition in its aspect as 'Sanātan Dharma'. Lutgendorf's perceptive study includes some very germane observations about Tulsī's role — or rather that posthumously foisted upon him — in the development of the ideals of Hindu cultural hegemony in the Hindi-speaking area.

The *bhaktamāl* tradition found no more fertile ground than Rajasthan, where the sectarian authors of the Dādū Panth and related traditions were quick to adopt this style of formulaic biography. Sectarian in authorship but often remarkably catholic in their inclusive attitude, these texts are copiously represented in the manuscript libraries which have been the main locus of recent research by Winand Callewaert. That these texts are only occasionally composed in Rajasthani dialects testifies to the continuing influence of the Eastern Hindi regions in the development of *nirguṇ* devotional traditions. Callewaert stresses the primacy of the oral tradition in the composition and compilation of the texts under review, and emphasises the role of itinerant devotees in the local propagation of devotional ideas born in Banaras and other parts of the eastern area. The oral origin of these texts raises complex issues for the text editor, since the standard editorial principle of working towards an ur-text has necessarily to be modified when a received text is known to be the product of multifarious oral sources; Callewaert here discusses procedures adopted in the editing of such texts as the *Parcaīs* of Anantadās and Jangopāl's *Janma līlā*.

The Sufi narrative motif investigated by Simon Digby is illustrative of numerous aspects of Islam in the subcontinent, including the relationship between universal Islamic beliefs and the specificity of locally grounded tradition; the status of the Sufi Shaykhs and the reverence won by these figures through their demonstrations of power, variously manifested; the relationship between Sufi tradition and the *Kāfir* or non-Muslim population of what the modern euphemism would call the 'host-community'; and the hierarchical accomodation of Jogī spirituality alongside Sufi authority. The particular anecdote of the rider of the wall relates to the existence of 'settled' Shaykhs whose stationary establishment in a particularised location reflects the prominence of local tradition, while at the same time harnessing a narrative which features in Sufi hagiography in places remote from the Indian subcontinent. The challenge to the sedentary Shaykh by a peripatetic stranger is re-

presented in this anecdote by what is perhaps the most striking of all the narrative images encountered in this book: the challenger demonstrates power by riding a tiger (or a lion – the usual sub-continental ambiguity, as encountered in Durgā iconography, applies), but is defeated by the incumbent's blithely casual miracle of riding the wall on which he happened to be sitting when the challenger approached. The implications of this motif, and the complex pattern of borrowing which underlie its reappearance in numerous different locations, are discussed in Digby's article.

If biographies of religious figures typically have a single-minded didactic purpose, the remarkable but little-studied corpus of Jain biography outlined by Phyllis Granoff proves a clear exception to this tendency. Jain hagiography is diverse in language, in genre, in content, in style, in subject, and in purpose. (Considering the breadth of this corpus it is not surprising that the Jain tradition should have produced what is probably India's first real autobiography, the *Ardhakathānaka* of the seventeenth-century Jain Banārsīdās)⁶. Granoff reminds us of the richness of a tradition which tends to become overlooked or obscured in the present by the more conspicuous manifestations of late medieval and modern religious communities. Her paper reveals the scholarly prowess of the Svetāmbara authors of Jain hagiography, and the two examples that she offers in translation illustrate something of the range of the extant texts. Granoff's first example is the Sanskrit *Prabandha kośa* account of a layman, the merchant Ābhada, whose pious life makes him a suitable case for hagiographic treatment, and who was associated with Hemacandra; the second is a Prakrit biography of the monk Jinavallabhasūri, a founder of the Kharatagaccha monastic lineage. Both subjects are also treated of in other texts, and Granoff compares the different versions. Ābhada's hagiography has as a major theme the question of lay wealth and patronage (and the details of the narrative from its diverse sources allows Granoff to find a quite personal portrayal of the merchant in the text); Jinavallabhasūri's has quite a different emphasis, relating inter alia to the competitive claims of sectarian authority mentioned briefly above. An extensive bibliography is provided to

⁶ For text and fluent English prose translation see Mukund Lath (ed. and trans.), *Half a tale: a study in the interrelationship between autobiography and history* (Jaipur: Rajasthan Prakrit Bharati Sansthan, 1981).

meet the needs of scholars whose interests are sure to be aroused by Granoff's ground-breaking work.

S.G. Tulpule's account of Marathi hagiography concentrates on non-Mahānubhāva literature. His survey indicates many of the common problems of literary history in this field: the floruit of even such a celebrated poet as Nāmdev, for example, is not ascertainable even as to century, let alone decade or year, and the nature of any contemporary connection between him and his subject (and guru), Jñāneśvar, is all but lost to modern scholarship. While pointing out the 'fantastic' nature of certain passages within Nāmdev's text, Tulpule defends him as being 'at once a philosopher, a poet and a saint', and finds the text useful as the only early 'source' for a life of the author of the *Jñāneśvari*. Later Marathi writing has a more clearly sectarian stamp, as for example in the fourteenth-century cult of Dattātrey and its sixteenth-century hagiography *Gurucaritra* which can be seen as contributing to growing perceptions of a Maharashtrian cultural unity. That Nāmdev (who with Jñāneśvar, Eknāth, Tukārām and Rāmdās forms a Marathi pentad of *bhaktas*) should himself become the subject of biographical writing is indicative of another common element in this genre: that hagiographers themselves become ideal subjects for hagiology⁷. The works attributed to the most prolific of the Marathi hagiographers, the eighteenth-century poet Mahipati (who characterised himself as 'the flute under the fingers of God') are informative about contemporary religious attitudes and provided models for later writers. Tulpule's survey of Marathi hagiography concludes with a discussion of the Jain and Christian traditions.

Western scholarship on the Kannada-speaking region has concentrated primarily on Virashaivism and Jainism; but this imbalance is corrected by Robert Zydenbos in his paper on Mādhva hagiography. The tradition includes both Sanskrit and Kannada texts, the latter often expanding and elaborating on the former by adding material from sources presumed to have been oral. Zydenbos introduces this hagiographical tradition through three examples: that of Madhvācārya (1238-1317) himself, that of the sixteenth-century sectarian author Vādirāja, and that of 'one of the most important saintly personalities of Karnataka', the seventeenth-century figure Rāghavendra-svāmin, whose popularity

⁷ Nāmdev's prominence did not, of course, rest *only* on his status as a hagiographer.

extends beyond the merely sectarian. These successive biographies not only portray the development of Dvaita philosophy as the true representation of Vedic knowledge: they also recount the physical feats — manifestations of supernatural powers — demonstrated by their subjects (and particularly of Madhva himself, who is regarded as a reincarnation of Hanumat and Bhīma, as well as being an *avatāra* of Vāyu). Zydenbos summarises the three biographies and discusses the various ways in which the original Sanskrit texts have been expanded by later versions. The popularity of these texts, whose commentarial tradition reaches into the modern era, shows their importance in the dissemination of sectarian theological and devotional teaching. From the point of view of cultural history it is interesting to note a marked decline in the literary tradition during the period under discussion from the rhetorical sophistication of Madhva's biography, to the literary decadence of Rāghavendra svāmin's (which text has the unusual distinction of apparently having been expurgated by its own subject). In conclusion, Zydenbos isolates various recurring or formulaic elements in the hagiographies he has introduced, and shows the significance of these texts in the development of Mādhva Vaishnavism.

Several of the papers in this volume have addressed aspects of cultural history which directly underlie contemporary issues in the subcontinent. The Tamil hagiography *Periya purāṇam* is amongst the clearest examples of this category: the manner in which its twelfth-century author Cekkīlār reinforces a sense of Tamil Śaiva sectarian and cultural identity has contributed to making this one of the classics of Śaiva devotionalism, while his poem's combining of the grace of classical *kāvya* with the narrative scope of a *purāṇa* is another element in its success. Indira Peterson's discussion of the *Periya purāṇam* begins with an account of how the text became canonized, coming to be regarded as a 'fifth Veda' and taking its place as complementary to earlier canonical texts with which it shared the celebration of Tamil culture and 'the values of the region's dominant non-Brahman caste-groups'. Cekkīlār's contribution was to restate the themes of his forebears in the context of Cola hegemony, providing the first systematic and authoritative Tamil Śaiva hagiography which would act as a counter to contemporary Jain tradition and would lay claim to equality with the Vedas in terms of sanctity. Peterson notes that Cekkīlār's characters are at once particular and (in a manner seen in several of the traditions examined in this book) paradigmatic. She traces the

sources and structure of the text to antecedents in the Śaiva *Tevāram* canon, which form another focus of her paper; and in surveying the recurrent narrative themes of Śaiva biography she explains the nature of the Tamil Śaiva 'hagiographical project'.

In terms of the function of hagiography as a statement of sectarian attitudes there can be no more ambitious or sophisticated a text than the Bengali *Caitanya caritāmṛta*, Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja's biography of Caitanya. The text combines accessibility with authority, and is surely a classic of its genre. Tony Stewart shows how its supremely erudite author composed and compiled a standard hagiographic digest which is not only a summation of sectarian learning but also an authority against which the acceptability of any future texts would necessarily have to be measured. The text is written in a style of Bengali which, while being accessible to the lay devotee lacking a knowledge of Sanskrit, is redolent in tone of the Sanskrit works on which it draws. By appropriating other texts (some twelve hundred Sanskrit *śloka*s are imbedded within the narrative), by accommodating discrepancies between various earlier versions of Caitanya's biography, and by producing what Stewart has explained as 'a comprehensive view not only of the events of Caitanya's life, but of what Caitanya's life *meant*', Kṛṣṇadāsa simultaneously transmits and develops the Caitanya tradition. Far from being only a manual of Gauḍīya *bhakti* (a function which it performs incomparably well), it actually constitutes for the first time a full articulation of the Gauḍīya theological system. Of all the hagiographies discussed in this book, the *Caitanya caritāmṛta* probably represents most fully the articulation of a religious system through and around the biography of an individual.

The hagiographical traditions discussed here are varied in respect of time, place, language, religion, register, and purpose. Of the many connections between them, the formulae through which the narratives are told are particularly evident: miracle stories (including miraculous births, comparable to the *svayambhū* origins of temple deities), dream interventions, precocious erudition, conquests in debate with established scholars, conversions, adventurous journeys, credence-stretching longevity, formulaic sacred numbers and other such themes occur time and again, inviting recourse to a system of motif classification such as is applied to folk narrative and oral epic. Some hagiographies are naïve and predict-

able panegyrics; others act as informal commentary on the primary writings of *bhaktas*; still others play a central part in the formulation and transmission of sectarian theology and communal identity. In all such categories, the genre of hagiography offers fertile ground for many different aspects of scholarly research in the history of Indian culture and religion.

W.H. McLeod

THE HAGIOGRAPHY OF THE SIKHS

*Introduction*¹

Like all religious groups the Sikhs have produced a flourishing hagiography, one which was particularly rich and detailed in earlier times but which still circulates widely today. In recent years it has actually been significantly stimulated by political events in the Punjab. The subject is one which must be approached with great caution, for inevitably those who do research on the Sikhs or Sikhism will be plunged into all manner of controversy as they seek an understanding of their subject. This is particularly the case when dealing with the Sikh Gurūs, though there are other heroes of the Sikh faith who certainly attract considerable attention. The reaction which it calls forth is one which affects the Sikh commentator as well as the person who stands outside the Panth². It is, however, a response which brings its substantial rewards. Without the experience of grappling with the considerable demands of hagiography the historian or the theologian of the Sikhs would be vastly the poorer.

For the period of the Gurūs (1469-1708) Sikh hagiography focuses on all ten Gurūs but it discriminates between them, some re-

¹ Abbreviations:

B40: W.H. McLeod, *The B-40 Janam-sākhī* (Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 1980).

EST: W.H. McLeod, *Early Sikh tradition: a study of the janam-sākhīs* (the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980).

GNSR: W.H. McLeod, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh religion* (the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968, reprinted by OUP, Delhi, 1976).

PSA: W.H. McLeod, *Popular Sikh art*, (OUP, New Delhi, 1991).

Pur JS: Vir Singh (ed.), *Purātan Janam-sākhī*, (5th ed., Khalsā Samachar, Amritsar, 1959).

² Panth ('path' or 'way') is the acceptable term for the Sikh community. There are many different *panths* (religious ways) in India, but only one Panth. The capital P makes the difference. From '*Panth*' is the adjective '*panthik*' (or '*panthic*'). Both words deserve (like '*Khalsā*') to be incorporated into standard English usage.

ceiving abundant treatment and others being only briefly considered. Two of the Gurūs can be regarded as far above the others, and of these one emerges as paramount. The two Gurūs are the first and the last: Gurū Nānak portrayed as the supremely wise sage and Gurū Gobind Singh as the heroic wielder of the sword. Of them the one standing at the apex is, without doubt, Gurū Nānak (1469-1539). This is perhaps only natural. He it was who first revealed the sacred teachings so revered by the Sikhs and so he is, after all, universally regarded as the founder of the faith. For this reason the stories cluster around him in particular profusion, and even in the popular art of the Sikhs his representation surpasses that of the mighty tenth Gurū.

Gurū Gobind Singh does, however, prepare the way for what is undoubtedly the dominant role of the Sikhs as far as the outside world is concerned. Indeed, the influence reaches further back to the career of the sixth Gurū, Hargobind (1606-44). As the first of Sikh Gurūs to resort to warfare as a means of protecting the Panth the sixth Gurū gave rise to the tradition of *mīrī* and *pīrī*. The story related by tradition is that his father and predecessor, Gurū Arjan, instructed him to sit fully armed on his throne³. Gurū Hargobind accordingly invested himself with two swords at his accession. One represented the *pīrī* or spiritual leadership which had been exercised by all the Gurūs who preceded him. The other was the *mīrī* or temporal power which was, for the Sikh Gurūs, an entirely new departure.

Under Gobind Singh, the tenth and last of the personal Gurūs (1675-1708), the temporal power was sorely tested, as the states which surrounded him in the Shivalik Hills were joined by Mughal forces from the plains. Together these allies did their best to destroy the power of the Sikh Panth. Meanwhile Gurū Gobind Singh had established the Khalsā in or shortly before 1699. This was the order which all Sikhs who were prepared to fight for their faith were called upon to join. The Khalsā formed the real strength of his army and although he suffered heavy casualties he was eventually able to survive the concerted attack of his enemies on his capital of Anandpur. Escaping from the besieged town he made his way southwards into the desert area of Bhatinda. Finally he joined up with his former enemies when the hostile emperor Aurangzeb died

³ M.A. Macauliffe, *The Sikh religion*, vol. iii (the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1909), p. 99.

in 1707, and while accompanying Aurangzeb's successor in the Deccan he was assassinated in 1708.

A large hagiographic literature is associated with the lifetime of Gurū Gobind Singh, strongly emphasising his manly strength and physical bravery. The emphasis has, in other words, dramatically changed since the time of Gurū Nānak. It should, however, be remembered that both approaches are prominently displayed in Sikh hagiography and that both are loyally preserved to the present day. One may suspect that the radically differing emphases appeal to different sections of the Panth, but certainly outward evidence does little to support such a notion.

The approach characteristic of the treatment of Gurū Gobind Singh continues unchanged into the succeeding eighteenth century and informs the Sikh understanding of that most critical of periods in their history. Every Sikh knows of certain heroes from the eighteenth century and those heroes performed deeds of bravery which continue to inspire the Panth. The hagiography of the eighteenth century still lives on today and it is certainly no accident that Sikhs choose to interpret present-day circumstances in the Punjab in terms which vividly recall heroes from that period. In so doing they present to the outside world a view of the Panth which exalts physical bravery and acclaims the power to wield a sword (or a gun). The Sikhs seem, in other words, to be a forthright people notable for their militancy.

This impression may be accurate up to a point, but it is certainly not the whole truth. It must again be emphasised that with this militant expression of their hagiography the Sikhs retain an even stronger emphasis on their view of Nānak as the supremely wise teacher, as a figure clothed in meditation and imparting an impression of perfect peace. Both varieties of Sikh hagiography are important. There is the treatment of Gurū Nānak the wise teacher as represented in what are called the *janam-sākhīs* and in popular poster or calendar art; and there is the heroic variety as represented above all others by the figure of Gurū Gobind Singh. Together these two provide a glimpse of the Panth which has indeed its militant aspect but yet possesses in its figure of Gurū Nānak a very

different approach to life.

Gurū Nānak and the Janam-sākhīs

The hagiographic treatment of Gurū Nānak may be generally divided into two segments, both prominent in the Punjab today and indeed throughout the world wherever Sikhs are to be found. One is in the oral accounts of the life of the Gurū which were eventually written down as the janam-sākhīs (the traditional 'biographies' of the Gurū)⁴. Janam-sākhīs are still widely read today and their stories are endlessly related to Sikhs of all ages. The other one is in the popular bazaar art of the Sikhs⁵. Wherever Sikhs go, whether in the home or the shop or the gurdwārā (the Sikh temple), they will find on the walls examples of this form of art, either as calendars or as separate posters. In these pictures Gurū Gobind Singh is certainly prominent, but it would appear that even he cannot equal the first Gurū in the frequency of his appearance. It is true that as far as actual influence in the Panth is concerned the roles are reversed and Gurū Gobind Singh, Lord of the Khalsā, stands supreme. In the popular literature, however, Nānak is more commonly portrayed than the tenth Gurū and arguably the same also applies to Sikh poster art.

The janam-sākhīs are commonly defined as 'biographies' or 'chronicles' of Gurū Nānak. This they assuredly are not, although the conviction has proven extremely difficult to shake within the Sikh community as a whole. Even educated Sikhs assert that although certain elements must be discarded (notably their widespread miracles and wonder stories) the janam-sākhīs can still be regarded as generally reliable biographies: remove those elements from them which offend our modern taste or which the educated person today finds impossible to believe and the considerable residue will constitute an authentic biography of Gurū Nānak.

4 The janam-sākhīs are treated in detail in W.H. McLeod, *Early Sikh tradition: a study of the janam-sākhīs* (the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980). See also idem, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh religion* (the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968, reprinted by OUP, Delhi, 1976), chap. 2; idem, *The evolution of the Sikh community* (OUP, Delhi, 1975, and the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1976), chap. 2; and idem, *The B-40 Janam-sākhī* (Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 1980).

5 The poster art of Gurū Nānak is treated in W.H. McLeod, *Popular Sikh art* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1991).

This represents a common but wholly mistaken view of the *janam-sākhīs*. Until this fundamental error is cleared away there can be no understanding of the *janam-sākhīs*, nor of their very considerable testimony as sources for the later history of the Panth. It is not sufficient to interpret their many anecdotes as strictly historical but overlaid by subsequent accretions of miraculous material. Although some stories are indeed formed in this way they are very few. The vast majority must be wholly rejected as historical sources for the life of Gurū Nānak, and stripping away the miraculous overlay will not reveal actual incidents. The *janam-sākhīs* do not provide history. What they do provide is rather an interpretation of the Gurū's life, one which reflects the piety of his devout followers belonging to later generations, and which draws extensively upon a fund of the marvellous and the miraculous. As such they can be located squarely within the category of hagiographic literature.

The interpretation which the *janam-sākhīs* seek to communicate is that Nānak is the one who reveals the path to liberation and all who desire it must become his humble followers. This basic conclusion is spelt out in the *janam-sākhīs* and all the tales which they relate are told in order to support this interpretation⁶. This, indeed, is the nature of all hagiography. All saints, holy men, queens of heaven, rishis, pirs, gurus, in fact everyone who provides the focus for hagiographical devotion will fulfil this basic need. All are believed to provide access to salvation or liberation of the spirit, and the wondrous stories which command devotion from a holy person's followers will be told in order to confirm that interpretation.

The composite term '*janam-sākhī*' consists of two parts which evolved separately. The word *sākhī* means literally 'testimony' and this is precisely what the various anecdotes are supposed to be. They are testimonies to the life of Gurū Nānak and to the wonders which he performed. *Janam* had a rather more complex origin. The word means 'birth' and one of the *janam-sākhīs* relates that Gurū Aṅgad (Nānak's successor) undertook a quest for the *janam-patrī*, or horoscope, of his predecessor. This came to be applied to the stories of Gurū Nānak and *patrī* was later abandoned in favour of *sākhī*. The composite term accordingly means 'testimony to the birth [of Nānak]' and has long since been understood as a testimony to his life. The term *sākhī* has meanwhile come to designate

⁶ EST, pp. 8-11.

any particular anecdote. These have been gathered to form collections, and these collections of anecdotes form what we now know as the *janam-sākhīs*⁷.

These collections of anecdotes have been interpreted as the authentic life of Gurū Nānak and on this basis have been built numerous books which purport to be reliable biographies. Perhaps the most famous of these has been the first volume of M.A. Macauliffe's *The Sikh religion*. These books, however, do not relate the biography of Gurū Nānak, any more than their sources serve as authentic means of communication. Macauliffe's volume, like most of the other 'biographies' of Gurū Nānak, is strictly a collection of hagiographic anecdotes.

The language of the *janam-sākhīs* is usually Punjabi (with a marked trend towards Braj in the one attributed to Miharbān) and likewise the script is generally Gurmukhi. Of the early *janam-sākhīs* the first manuscript to bear a date was completed in VS 1715 (AD 1658), an illustrated copy in the possession of a Delhi family. The collecting of anecdotes, however, will certainly have preceded this date, and although the recording of *janam-sākhīs* will have begun many years after the death of Nānak the actual circulation of oral anecdotes is a process that will date from the actual lifetime of the Gurū⁸.

The Janam-sākhīs of the Bālā tradition

This corpus of *janam-sākhī* literature may be divided into a number of recognisable groups or traditions. The most popular of these is undoubtedly the collection of *janam-sākhīs* of the Bālā tradition, so named because the events which this tradition relates centre around a companion of the Gurū called Bhāī Bālā (Brother Bālā)⁹. It is somewhat ironic that the *janam-sākhīs* of the Bālā tradition have acquired such a considerable popularity, for its origins in the middle years of the seventeenth century seem to be related to the heretical Hindalis who were vigorously opposed to the Gurūs of the orthodox line. None of the other *janam-sākhī* traditions give Bhāī Bālā more than a passing reference and generally they omit mention of him altogether.

⁷ *EST*, p. 11.

⁸ *EST*, pp. 13, 19.

⁹ The title 'Bhāī' is applied to Sikhs who have earned reputations for piety or scholarship.

According to the *Bālā janam-sākhī* Bālā was the intimate associate of Gurū Nānak, his childhood friend and his constant companion on all his travels. This role he shared with the minstrel Mardānā. The *janam-sākhī* all begin with a rather clumsy narrative which portrays Gurū Aṅgad, Nānak's successor, as regretting that he did not possess his deceased predecessor's horoscope. It so happened that Bhāī Bālā had only recently learnt of the existence of Gurū Aṅgad and he happened to arrive in search of him at this fortunate moment. Volunteering to go for the horoscope to Nānak's birthplace of Talvandi he journeyed thence and came back triumphantly bearing the document. He then settled down to transcribe it and in this process it mysteriously becomes a chronicle of the many events in Gurū Nānak's lifetime.

For these many events the author (or authors) of the original *Bālā* account obviously used the various anecdotes which were circulating orally or in writing. There are actually two principal versions of the tradition, one which terminates before the death of Nānak and the other which appends death *sākhī*s from the *Miharbān* tradition. The first is obviously the older. The *Bālā* version is renowned for the jumbled sequence of the Gurū's travels (he frequently has Nānak travel long distances by merely performing *tai-i-safar*, or instant locomotion merely by closing his eyes) and for the exaggerated nature of many of the miracles which Nānak performs. The popularity of the *Bālā* tradition is something which can only cause either humour or embarrassment to educated Sikhs, but for the mass market in the Punjab its success remains unchallenged¹⁰.

The Janam-sākhī of the Purātan tradition

The second major tradition was not discovered until the later nineteenth century, but at least it seemed to provide an answer for those who regarded the *Bālā* version with embarrassment. In 1869 the Punjab government commissioned a German missionary, Ernst Trumpp, to translate into English the *Ādi Granth* (the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, or sacred scripture of the Sikhs). Although Trumpp's task was limited to the scripture he nevertheless tried to find out more about the first Gurū's life. In India he was confined to the *Bālā janam-sākhī*, but when he returned to Europe he chanced in 1872

¹⁰ *EST*, pp. 15-20.

upon a hitherto unknown manuscript amongst those which were forwarded to him by the India Office Library in London. Upon scrutinising it he came to the conclusion that it was 'the fountain, from which all others have been drawn largely'¹¹.

This manuscript is commonly termed the *Colebrooke Janam-sākhī* in English works¹² and in Punjabi it is generally known as the *Valāitvālī Janam-sākhī*, 'the janam-sākhī from overseas'. As soon as Trumpp's book appeared, several Sikhs asked for the manuscript to be forwarded to India and in view of the considerable interest which it aroused the Punjab Government arranged to print a zincographic facsimile of it. Sharing Trumpp's opinion of its age some of them dubbed it the *Purātan Janam-sākhī*, the 'Ancient' janam-sākhī. As a description of the manuscript this title cannot be sustained. In presenting a relatively ordered sequence for Gurū Nānak's travels the *Purātan* version must be classified as a janam-sākhī belonging to a period later than the first products. The actual manuscript is evidently from the eighteenth century and the tradition's beginnings are unlikely to lie earlier than the seventeenth or late sixteenth century. The description is also misleading as it suggests that there is only one *Purātan* janam-sākhī. More manuscripts have since been discovered, each differing in various ways from the Colebrooke version yet clearly presenting the same general outline in much the same words. We can accordingly speak of the *Purātan* tradition rather than of a single *Purātan* janam-sākhī.

The real reason why the discovery was greeted with such enthusiasm was that the *Purātan* version clearly offered a more rational account of the life of Nānak than that given in the Bālā tradition. *Purātan* certainly contains its fair share of miracle stories, but they are generally less grotesque than those of Bālā. Moreover, *Purātan* provides its readers with a coherent travel itinerary, sending Nānak to the four cardinal points of the compass before having him settle down in the Punjab. First he travelled to the east, reaching in Kamrup what the subsequent commentators have thought must be Assam. Next he went south, ending up in the kingdom of Raja Sivanabh which (we are told) was Sri Lanka. Then he proceeded north, climbing Mount Sumeru (interpreted by

¹¹ E. Trumpp, *The Adi Granth* (W.H. Allen, London, 1877), p. ii.

¹² The manuscript had been presented to the India Office Library by H.T. Colebrooke.

commentators as Mount Kailash, because Mount Sumeru exists only in legend) and there held discourse with the nine famous Nāths. Finally, he was despatched to the west where he entered Mecca. Returning to the Punjab he founded the village of Kartarpur on the banks of the Ravi river and after one trip within the Punjab eventually died there in 1538 (not 1539 as usually accepted)¹³.

This coherent travel itinerary greatly appealed to the educated men who were responsible for the Singh Sabha renewal movement¹⁴ and they eagerly seized upon it as the obviously authentic version of where Nānak had gone. It scarcely needs repeating at this stage that these men were mistaken, but to this day their view of Gurū Nānak's travels (as indeed of his whole life) informs a substantial majority of all books dealing with him. *Bālā* may still rule the popular mind, but educated opinion is now safely in the hands of *Purātan*¹⁵.

The Miharbān Janam-sākhī

The third major group is that of the *Miharbān* tradition. Very few examples of the *Miharbān* tradition have survived and to this day only the first three *pothīs* (or 'volumes') of the complete six *pothīs* have been traced. Orthodox Sikhs are not particularly concerned by their disappearance, for *Miharbān* was the son and successor of one who disputed the title of Gurū. His father, Prithī Chand, was the eldest son of the fourth Gurū, Ram Das, and when the

¹³ *GNSR*, pp. 99-101.

¹⁴ The Singh Sabha movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has exercised a determinative influence upon the affairs of the Panth. Indeed the influence is still very much present today. The Singh Sabha was divided broadly into two factions known as the Sanatan Sikhs and the Tat Khalsā. The Tat Khalsā proved to be intellectually dominant and was very effective in remoulding the Panth according to the educated views of its members. A part of this remoulding was the selection of the *Purātan* tradition as the enlightened version of the *janam-sākhī* accounts. Vir Singh was perhaps the dominant figure among intellectuals in the Tat Khalsā group and Macauliffe was closely associated with several of its prominent members. The works of Harjot Singh Oberoi and N.G. Barrier cover the Singh Sabha period well. See for example their contributions to Joseph T. O'Connell *et al.* (eds.), *Sikh history and religion in the twentieth century* (University of Toronto Centre for South Asian Studies, Toronto, 1988), pp. 136-190.

¹⁵ *EST*, pp. 22-30.

youngest son, Arjan, was designated fifth Gurū, Prithī Chand vigorously contested the appointment. He succeeded in attracting a portion of the Sikhs to his side and this faction was branded the Minas ('scoundrels') by the followers of Gurū Arjan. Throughout the seventeenth century the Minas sustained their opposition to the orthodox line of Gurūs and when Gurū Gobind Singh founded the Khalsā in 1699 he is said to have named the Minas as one of five groups which initiated Khalsā Sikhs must avoid. Miharbān was firmly within the Mina tradition and for this reason his janam-sākhī was regarded as plainly heretical.

A reading of the portion of the janam-sākhī which has been found does nothing to support this view. Miharbān may have been schismatic but he certainly was not heretical, at least no more so than the other janam-sākhī writers. This particular janam-sākhī tradition differs from the others in that although the customary range of anecdotes is incorporated in the collection Bābā Nānak almost always uses the occasion to deliver a lengthy discourse expounding one or other of his hymns. For this reason the janam-sākhī is not divided into a collection of sākhīs but rather a series of *goṣṭs* or 'discourses'. The earlier part of the janam-sākhī corresponds very roughly with the *Purātan* pattern of an ordered travel itinerary, but thereafter the two diverge¹⁶.

The Ādi Sākhīs

A fourth janam-sākhī tradition, one which shares some material with *Miharbān*, is that of the *Ādi Sākhīs*. This was first uncovered in Lahore during the years preceding the partition of India in 1947 and has since been confirmed by the discovery of manuscripts on the Indian side of the border. The title *Ādi Sākhīs*, or 'Original *sākhīs*', is misleading, for although the version which it presents is certainly an old one it nevertheless represents an intermediate stage in the growth of janam-sākhīs. This is indicated by the fact that it shares borrowings from the *Miharbān* tradition, both in terms of *sākhīs* which it has taken from *Miharbān* and others which it has given. The substance of the *janam-sākhī* is the material which has been termed Narrative II, a collection of anecdotes which is also found in the *B40 Janam-sākhī*¹⁷. Narrative I, by contrast, com-

¹⁶ *EST*, pp. 33-6.

¹⁷ *EST*, pp. 30-3.

prises the anecdotes which make up the bulk of the *Purātan* tradition, a source which can be divided into two in order to accommodate the two main versions of *Purātan*¹⁸.

The Gyān ratanāvalī and the Mahimā prakāś

Following our discussion of the main janam-sākhī traditions, at least two other traditions may be mentioned, and there are a few single works which also deserve to be recognised. The two traditions are the *Gyān-ratanāvalī* and the *Mahimā prakāś*. The first of these is attributed to the famous Sikh martyr Mani Singh executed in 1738, and consists of a greatly amplified version of the work of the Sikh poet Bhāī Gurdās, substantially enlarged by additions of *Bālā* material. Recent research has shown that this tradition derives from the Udāsī sect of the Panth and that it must be dated sometime in the early nineteenth century¹⁹. The second tradition, the *Mahimā prakāś*, which divides into the substantially different *Mahimā prakāś vāratak* (the prose version) and *Mahimā prakāś kavītā* (the version in verse). The tradition represents a janam-sākhī collection which was made in or near Khadur, the village of Gurū Aṅgad, and it also differs from the others in that it recounts the lives of succeeding Gurūs²⁰.

Vār I of Bhāī Gurdās

This leaves only the various individual works which narrate anecdotes of Gurū Nānak, two of which are particularly important. The first is the poetic account which Bhāī Gurdās includes in his first *vār* or 'ode'. Bhāī Gurdās was a very early collector of anecdotes, his career spanning the time from the third Gurū (to whom he was related) to the sixth. His collection is brief, but in view of its

¹⁸ *EST*, p. 231.

¹⁹ Surjit Hans, *A reconstruction of Sikh history from Sikh literature* (ABS Publications, Jalandhar, 1988), pp. 206-11.

²¹ *EST*, pp. 43-45.

early origins it is particularly interesting²¹.

The B40 Janam-sākhī

The other work is much later, yet for different reasons equally interesting. This is the *B40 Janam-sākhī*, so named because of the number which it bears in the India Office Library, London. No tradition has been established by this janam-sākhī, but it is particularly valuable for at least three reasons. First it is dated, the given day in VS 1790 corresponding to 31 August 1733. Secondly, the place and circumstances of the collection can be satisfactorily deduced: the janam-sākhī was recorded in the area north-west of Nānak's village of Kartarpur for a non-Khalsā *saṅgat*. Thirdly (and perhaps most important of all), its contents can all be traced to various sources²².

Development of the Janam-sākhī traditions

These individual janam-sākhīs and janam-sākhī traditions represent later stages in the growth process of the hagiography concerning Gurū Nānak. The first stage leaves no evidences and can only be postulated. This comprises the individual anecdotes about Bābā Nānak which circulated orally, the process beginning in his lifetime. Devout followers would repeat these stories about the wise teachings which he uttered and the wondrous deeds which he performed, and these would pass from mouth to mouth.

The second stage is represented by Bhāi Gurdās's *Vār* I when the decision to record the anecdotes was taken. At this stage the pattern consisted of only a general ordering of them, the account covering Bābā Nānak's visits to Mount Sumeru, Mecca, Baghdad, Achal Batala, and Multan. He then returns to Kartarpur again, and after renaming his disciple Lahina as Aṅgad and appointing him as his successor he passes away.

In the third stage the impulse to order the anecdotes into coherent sequences becomes progressively stronger. The *Bālā* janam-sākhīs testify to a relatively early phase where the various *sākhīs* form a rudimentary sequence corresponding to childhood

²⁰ *EST*, pp. 37-42.

²² *B40* provides an English translation together with an introduction. See pp. 19-25 of the introduction for a discussion on the origin of the janam-sākhī.

and early adulthood, the teaching career of Bābā Nānak, and (in the case of some *Bālā* janam-sākhīs) his death. In this early phase no attempt is made to fit the anecdotes of the Gurū's teaching career into a rational pattern. A later phase is represented by the *Purātan* version. In this tradition the anecdotes of the Gurū's adult life are placed in a coherent sequence comprising four missionary journeys (or *udāsīs*) to the cardinal points of the compass followed by a single journey around the Punjab after Kartarpur had been founded. The *Miharbān* version certainly begins with a relatively coherent travel itinerary, but loses this some distance into the tradition. It can accordingly be regarded as a middle example of this third phase.

Anecdotes from oral tradition are constantly being added to existing traditions, an excellent example being provided by the Narrative III material included in the *B40 Janam-sākhī*²³. A more recent example is the enormously popular tale of Panja Sahib. This is the story of how Bābā Nānak stopped with his hand a great boulder rolled down the hill at him by a jealous Muslim dervish called Vali Qandhari, and how he left the mark of his palm imprinted in the rock. The anecdote dates from the early part of the nineteenth century and was not added to a janam-sākhī tradition until it was appended to a printed version of the *Bālā* version late in the century²⁴.

The *Purātan* pattern stands at the top of the janam-sākhī evolution, testifying to the relatively late formation of the tradition. This pattern, as we have already noted, has been adopted as the preferred model by modern biographers, and sākhīs from other traditions have been fitted into it as seems to the authors most appropriate. The Baghdad anecdote for example (which does not appear in the *Purātan* janam-sākhīs) is invariably attached by modern biographers to the Gurū's western tour, normally on his journey to Mecca.

Several different sources have been used to provide anecdotes for the janam-sākhīs, the first of which comprises authentic memories of Gurū Nānak's life story. Hagiography does not consist exclusively of legend and there are certain episodes which must certainly have their foundation in fact. The names of the Gurū's relatives

²³ *B40*, intro. pp. 12-13.

²⁴ The origins of this anecdote are described in *EST*, pp. 92-3.

provide a very good example. Another is provided by the janam-sākhī accounts of his taking up residence in Kartarpur.

These, however, can account for only a very small portion of the various janam-sākhīs. A far greater proportion of their material can be traced to direct and indirect borrowings from the Hindu epics and Puranas, from the Nāth tradition (which was strong in the Punjab), and from the anecdotes of the Sufis. Many anecdotes concerning Sufi *pīrs* were indeed circulating in the Punjab at the time and had been for several centuries before. The janam-sākhīs were in fact close parallels of the Sufi tazkiras, and because the latter had for long been present in the Punjab it follows that the debt of the janam-sākhī compilers was not simply confined to the borrowing of individual sākhīs.

The janam-sākhī compilers drew from anecdotes which were modelled on these various sources and in some instances they produced direct copies of them. A conspicuous example of the janam-sākhī debt to Hindu legend is provided by the story (which all the major janam-sākhīs contain) of Bābā Nānak's ascent of Mount Sumeru. Mount Sumeru exists only in legend, and although modern commentators will insist that it is really Mount Kailash the intention of the compilers and their oral sources is absolutely clear. In this particular case it must be linked with their debt to the Nāth tradition. It is on Mount Sumeru that Bābā Nānak holds discourse with the Nāth masters, leaving them convinced of his superiority²⁵.

Another borrowing which is evidently from the Nāth tradition (possibly via the followers of Kabīr) was the popular *Purātan* account of the death of Nānak. When the sheet was lifted from the deceased Nānak no body was found; and both bunches of flowers (which had been left on either side of him to determine whether the Hindus or Muslims should claim his body) remained fresh. Similar stories are recorded of Daryā Shāh of Uderola and Ratannāth of Peshawar²⁶.

Borrowings from Sufi sources are frequent, one example being provided by Bhāī Gurdās's anecdote concerning Bābā Nānak's approach to Multan. According to Bhāī Gurdās, as the Gurū drew close to Multan the *pīrs* in the city came out bearing a cup brimful

²⁵ *EST*, pp. 148-51.

²⁶ *GNSR*, pp. 50-1, 101. A similar story is related of Kabīr. David N. Lorenzen, *Kabir legends and Ananta-Das's Kabir Parachai* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1991), p. 41.

of milk. The message was quite clear. Multan was already full of holy men and there was room for no more. Bābā Nānak responded by plucking a jasmine flower from the roadside, placing a petal on the milk, and giving it back without spilling a drop. Not only was there room for one more but he would be the crown and glory of them all²⁷.

The same anecdote is contained in Sufi tradition of an earlier date. The Sufi *pir* was ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani, the city was Baghdad, the cup was filled with water, and the petal was that of a rose. It is, however, essentially the same anecdote, communicating exactly the same message. The anecdote had, moreover, been transferred by the Sufis to Multan and attached to two different *pirs*. The earlier was Baha’ al-Din Zakariyya who died in 1266. The second was the slightly later Shams al-Din Tabrizi who was sent the cup through Baha’ al-Din Zakariyya. In both instances the cup contained milk²⁸. Another version of the same anecdote is also found in Parsi sources²⁹.

The works of Gurū Nānak also provide much material for the *janam-sākhīs* and many of the *sākhīs* are projections of individual hymns contained in the *Ādi Granth*. This source also provided the substance of Mount Sumeru *sākhī*, an anecdote which comprises a lengthy discourse with five celebrated Nāth masters. For this discourse the author of the anecdote drew upon a series of verses, recorded in *Vār rāmkalī* of the *Ādi Granth*, which addresses each of the famous Nāths in turn³⁰. This was later supplemented when either he or (more likely) a later contributor added other scripture which seemed appropriate to a conversation with Nāth yogis. This was one of two major discourses with the Nāths, the other being set in Achal Batala. This second discourse, which is a less friendly affair, is also largely based on works which Nānak was obviously addressing to Nāth yogis³¹.

Many of these *sākhīs* which have obviously grown out of particular hymns by Nānak are rather lengthy, if only because the work

27 GNSR, pp. 141-2.

28 GNSR, p. 142.

29 The Parsi version relates that sugar was mixed in the bowl of milk which the king of Gujarat sent to the newly-arrived Parsis in the ninth or tenth century of the Christian era. Nancy and Ram Singh (eds.), *The sugar in the milk: the Parsis in India* (ISPCK, Delhi, 1986), pp. 11, 31.

30 *Ādi Granth*, pp. 52-3.

31 GNSR, p. 141.

which provides their occasion has to be quoted in full. Frequently, indeed, one *sākhī* will contain more than a single hymn. One which originally contained a single work records the occasion when Gurū Nānak's father, Kalu, sent his small son aged seven to the local Brahman to learn how to write.

The teacher wrote on a wooden slate and Baba Nanakji studied for one day. The following day [Nanak] remained silent. 'Why are you not studying?' the teacher asked Baba Nanak. 'What is it that you have studied and wish to teach me?' responded Baba Nanak. 'I have studied everything,' answered the teacher. 'Income and expenditure, revenue, the Vedas and the Shastras. I have studied them all.'

'These [subjects] which you have studied are all useless,' declared Baba Nanak. He then sang a hymn in [the measure of] *Siri Ragu*.

Burn your worldly affections, grind [them] and prepare ink;
let [your] mind be as paper of excellent quality...

The child Nānak sings the first verse and refrain of *Sirī Rāgu* 6 and then follows it up with an exposition of its meaning. In so doing the hagiographic narrative provides an example of didactic discourse, the *janam-sākhī* form which receives such prominence in the *Miharbān* tradition. Nānak works his way through all four verses of *Sirī Rāgu* 6 in this manner, expounding the meaning of each verse for the ostensible benefit of the dumbfounded teacher. The Brahman we are told, 'was astounded and did obeisance'.

Accepting him as one perfected he said:
'Do what you believe to be right.'

The *Purātan* tradition further enlarges this *sākhī*, using a work which seemed too appropriate to be omitted. Impressed by the relevance of Gurū Nānak's *Āsā paṭṭī likhī*, the *Colebrooke* compiler inserted it near the beginning of the *sākhī* and the anecdote was then complete in its developed form³².

In other instances the works of Gurū Nānak are merely added to an established hagiographic anecdote. No *janam-sākhī* reproduction of any work by Nānak corresponds completely to the *Ādi Granth* version and in several instances the hymn has no parallel in his authentic corpus. This is the case with the hymn that the *B40*

32 *B40*, pp. 5-9.

compiler recorded in the anecdote of Bābā Nānak's visit to Mecca. The actual anecdote is a borrowing from Sufī tradition and describes how the direction of Mecca always responds to the mystical power of the perfected Sufi. In the case of Nānak the well-known hagiographic tale proceeds as follows:

Baba [Nanak] lay down in the Mecca mosque and went to sleep with his feet towards the miharab³³. A mullah [who was] the mosque attendant appeared and cried out, '[You blasphemous] fellow! Why have you gone to sleep with your feet stretched out towards the house of God?'

'My friend,' answered Baba [Nanak], 'Lay my feet in whatever direction the house of God is not [to be found].'

When the mullah placed Baba [Nanak's] feet in a northerly direction the miharab moved in the same direction. When he moved Baba [Nanak's] feet to the east the front of the miharab also moved in that direction, and when he carried Baba [Nanak's] feet to the south the miharab went the same way. Then from the cupola [of the mosque] there echoed a voice, mysterious and resonant. 'Praise be to Nanak! Praise be to Nanak!'

The anecdote is complete, but the narrator adds at this point a hymn which strikes him as relevant and which he attributes to Bābā Nānak³⁴. Modern writers, seeking to rationalise the story without wholly abandoning it, terminate it where Bābā Nānak instructs the mullah to lay his feet in whatever direction God is not to be found. This makes it an entirely believable story to the modern reader. God is, after all, everywhere. It is not the form of story, however, that we find in the *janam-sākhī*.

Most of these anecdotes take the form of simple stories, commonly with one or more hymns added from the works of Nānak. The narrative anecdote is the *janam-sākhī* form *par excellence*. In their early pattern these narrative anecdotes are normally brief and succinct, as for example in the story of the two villages.

[Baba Nanak and his companion Mardana] departed from there and proceeding on their way they came to a village. They stopped there, but no one would give them shelter. Instead the

33 The niche in a mosque which indicates the *qiblah* (the direction of the Ka'bah).

34 B40, pp. 52-3.

inhabitants jeered at them. They moved on to the next town where they were warmly welcomed. Spending the night there they departed the next day. As they were leaving the Guru declared, 'May this town be uprooted and its inhabitants scattered.'

'This is strange justice,' exclaimed Mardana. 'The place where we received no hospitality you left alone, and the town which welcomed us so warmly you have uprooted!'

'Mardana,' replied the Guru, 'the inhabitants of the first town would go to another and corrupt it. When the inhabitants of this town go to another they will bring it truth and liberation of the spirit³⁵.

Anecdotes like this, however, are not particularly common. The *janam-sākhī*s represent a comparatively late stage in the growth of anecdotes and as a result much of what they contain represents the results of the grouping of closely related stories and the addition of extra detail. The evolved stories of Bābā Nānak's Mecca visit provide an example, as does his discourse with the Nāths at Achal Batala.

The Achal Batala story illustrates another very popular *janam-sākhī* form, the narrative discourse³⁶. These anecdotes will certainly contain at least one composition by Nānak and the substance of the Gurū's reply to his interlocutor is provided by one or more of his hymns. Discourses are further diversified in the *janam-sākhī*s by the didactic discourse (the form which achieves such prominence in the *Miharbān* tradition) and the occasional heterodox discourse. Through this latter form certain deviant ideas were able to penetrate the *janam-sākhī*s. The *haṭha-yoga* doctrines of the Nāths provide examples, a case in point being the lengthy *Prāṇ saṅgalī* which has made its way into the *Purātan* tradition³⁷. It is impossible to count all the many anecdotes or sub-anecdotes which the *janam-sākhī*s record about Bābā Nānak, but clearly the total must run into hundreds. Together they form the principal focus of Sikh hagiography, a body of oral tales and written literature which is still very much alive in the Panth of today.

35 Vir Singh (ed.), *Purātan Janam-sākhī*, (5th ed., Khalsā Samachar, Amritsar, 1959), p. 40.

36 *EST*, pp. 151-7.

37 *Pur JS*, pp. 89, 118.

In view of Nānak's immense popularity in the stories of the Sikh community it is scarcely surprising that his image is also dominant in the popular poster art which decorates Sikh homes, shops, and gurdwaras. Indeed the image is one which extends well beyond the confines of the Panth, for Nānak enjoys a considerable popularity amongst many Hindus as well. Scenes from particular episodes in the *janam-sākhī*s are represented by art of this kind, but the most popular representations are simple head- and shoulder-pictures of the Gurū. One print that is particularly widespread shows Nānak with head inclined, eyes slightly closed in mystic meditation, and right hand upraised in blessing³⁸. The beard is always white and the impression which the artists all try to communicate is that of the supremely wise sage. It is as such that Bābā Nānak rules the hearts of all his disciples, Hindu as well as Sikh.

The later Gurūs

Hagiography surrounds all the Sikh Gurūs and for each one of them particular stories are treasured and told. Some of them (the fourth Gurū, Ram Das, for example) enjoy rather more attention than others and two of them (the second and the seventh Gurūs) command rather less. Macauliffe faithfully relates all of the major stories which are told about them in his six-volume anthology of Sikh hagiography³⁹. Here we shall leave them aside and proceed directly to the tenth and last Gurū, the only one who can rival Gurū Nānak in popularity. It must, however, be emphasised that although they receive conspicuously less attention than Gurū Nānak and Gurū Gobind Singh the intervening eight Gurūs are by no means neglected in the Panth's tradition.

The style of writing which records the heroic deeds of Gurū Hargobind and particularly Gurū Gobind Singh is known as *gur-bilās* (or 'splendour of the Gurū'). As the community changed under the pressure of such features as the hostility of the Mughals and the invasions of the Afghans, so too was this change reflected in the principal variety of hagiography. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth century the *janam-sākhī*s certainly did not disap-

³⁸ The print appears as figure 15 in W.H. McLeod, *Popular Sikh art*, (OUP, New Delhi, 1991). It has been widely copied by artists producing bazaar posters.

³⁹ M.A. Macauliffe, *The Sikh religion* (the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1909).

pear, but the increasingly militant aspect of the Panth was felt to be much more appropriately expressed in this heroic form of writing.

Very few works were actually written in the *gur-bilās* style. Its origins can be traced to the *Bachitar nāṭak*, Gurū Gobind Singh's biography or autobiography in the *Dasam Granth*⁴⁰; and the first example is provided by Sainapati's *Gur śobhā*, written in either 1711 or 1745. In 1844 there appeared the book which, with its companion volume issued in 1823, was without doubt the most influential of all works in the development of Sikh hagiography. Santokh Singh had completed his *Nānak prakāś* in 1823 and twenty-one years later there appeared his *Gur pratāp suray*, popularly known as the *Sūraj prakāś*. Although not strictly in the *gur-bilās* style this substantial work certainly owed much to this fashion of writing and it is from its hagiographic record that the stories about Gurū Gobind Singh are principally drawn⁴¹.

Gurū Gobind

As we have already noted, the popular impression of Gurū Gobind Singh is very different from that of Gurū Nānak. In the portraits presented by the bazaar artists he is plainly a royal figure, the Lord of the Khalsā depicted as a young man with magnificent clothing and richly-embossed weapons of steel. His beard is slightly forked with the tips of the moustache turned up, and his person is adorned with jewellery. Clearly the Gurū arrayed in such manner answers a compelling need, one which pictures him as a king at once defiantly militant and abundantly rich⁴².

With Gurū Gobind Singh history certainly plays a much more meaningful role than for Gurū Nānak and much of his life is accessible to historical research to a degree which is not possible for the first Gurū. This means that many of the episodes which are recorded concerning him are at least founded on fact. The inaugu-

⁴⁰ The *Dasam Granth* forms the second scripture of the Sikhs, the first one being the *Ādi Granth*. The manner in which this collection took shape in the early eighteenth century is still a mystery. W.H. McLeod (ed.), *Textual sources for the study of Sikhism*, (the University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990), pp. 6-7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-13.

⁴² *PSA*, figures 37-50.

ration of the Khalsā, for instance, may not have taken place on Baisākhī Day 1699, but that something did take place at some date close to 1699 is beyond all question. Inevitably this narrows the scope for hagiographical expression, particularly as the Sikhs are a people who have shown some respect for the verdict of history. It is not completely eliminated, however, as the popular portraits of the Gurū make clear.

The hagiography of Gurū Gobind Singh is actually a mixing of fact and legend, with the factual portion commanding a larger share of the tradition than is the case with Gurū Nānak. In some cases the factual basis does not extend further than the setting within which an anecdote takes place. In others the actual incident is clearly factual, with only some of the details being traced to the imagination of the Gurū's followers. One such factual incident which recurs frequently in the popular art of today is the story of the cruel execution of the Gurū's two younger sons, bricked up alive by the Mughal governor of Sirhind. Apart from their manner of execution⁴³ there is not the slightest reason for doubting this episode, regardless of the use to which it has been put in Sikh martyrology.

The same mixing of fact and enthusiastic legend is also evident in Macauliffe's account of the death of the Gurū's two elder sons.

The Guru's son Ajit Singh now asked permission to go forth and fight single-handed with the enemy. He said he was the Guru's Sikh and son, and it was incumbent on him to fight even under desperate circumstances. The Guru approved of this proposal. Ajit Singh took with him five heroes... Ajit Singh performed prodigies of valour, and Muhammadans fell before him as shrubs before the wind. His companions all fought bravely and desperately. Zabardast Khan, the Lahore viceroy, was greatly distressed on seeing so many of his men slain, and called on his army to at once destroy the handful of Sikhs who were causing such havoc in the imperial ranks. When the swords of the Sikhs were broken and their arrows spent they spitted the enemy with their spears. Ajit Singh broke his spear on a Muhammadan. The enemy then made a fresh attack and fatally wounded him, defenceless as he was. He realized, however, that he had acted as befitted his race. He fell and slept the sleep of peace on his gory bed. The Guru on his death said, 'O God, it is Thou who

43 M.A. Macauliffe, *The Sikh religion*, vol. v, p. 198.

sentest him, and he hath died fighting for his faith. The trust Thou gavest hath been restored to Thee⁴⁴.

In like manner the Gurū's second son, Zorawar Singh, is also killed.

The chronicler states that Zorawar Singh made his way through the Muhammadan army like a crocodile through a stream. The enemy dropped like rain in the month of Sawan and Bhadon, until Zorawar Singh and his five companions fell overpowered by numbers⁴⁵.

There is no doubt that the Gurū, upon escaping from Anandpur, was besieged in the tiny fort of Chamkaur which is where this incident took place. The actual details, however, are the creation of later generations who have repeated the story with reverential awe.

A story of the plainly less factual variety, also related by Macauliffe, takes place during the Gurū's retreat to the deserts of southern Punjab in 1705 after his evacuation of Anandpur.

Before the Guru had set out from Jatpura he presented his host Kalha with a sword to preserve in memory of him. He was to honour it with incense and flowers. As long as he did so, he and his family should flourish, but, if ever he wore it, he should lose his possessions. Kalha during his lifetime treated the sword according to the Guru's injunctions, and so did his son after him. But his grandson put on the weapon, and employed it in the chase. In endeavouring to kill a deer with it he struck his own thigh and died of the wound. The author of the *Suraj Parkash* wrote that this incident actually occurred when he was a boy and he still remembered it⁴⁶.

It is not difficult to imagine that the reported incident, occurring in the late eighteenth century when Santokh Singh, the author of the *Sūraj prakāś*, was a boy, it was very easily converted into a part

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

of the hagiography concerning the tenth Gurū.

Bandā Bahādur

Following the death of Gurū Gobind Singh the Panth was launched on the turbulent century which so graphically accounts for many of the traditions which remain dominant today. His death was immediately followed, however, by the ascent to brief power in the Punjab of a figure who has never been securely anchored in the tradition of the Sikhs. This was Bandā Bahādur, the leader who held portions of the Punjab in the early eighteenth century before he was finally captured and executed by the Mughals in 1716. The general history of Bandā is known, but his place in Sikh hagiography has been comparatively tenuous.

This may have something to do with the controversies which he has left and with the suspicion that he was not quite an orthodox Sikh of the Khalsā. On the other hand, the popular imagination typically pays little heed to finer points of doctrine if an individual's actions meet with approval. Bandā was noted for his vigorous opposition to the Mughals and for the punishment which he meted out to the persecutors of the Gurūs. As such he has certainly earned strong approval and the comparative shortage of his hagiographic contribution is somewhat puzzling.

Dīp Singh

With Bandā out of the way, however, the various heroes of the eighteenth century rise up and contribute handsomely to the growth of Sikh hagiography. Of these stalwarts of a militant tradition the most popular of all appears to be Bābā Dīp Singh. Certainly his picture figures very prominently in bazaar art. A singularly bloodstained representation of the decapitated Dīp Singh, fighting onwards with his head in his hand, is perhaps the most popular of all subjects in the whole of Sikh poster art⁴⁷. If hagiography possesses the power to nerve and inspire, the members of the Panth are certainly well prepared for the militant role of the Khalsā.

There are actually two traditions concerning Dīp Singh, a leader of only second rank in the wars for control of the Punjab in the

⁴⁷ PSA, figure 53, p. 124.

middle years of the eighteenth century. Bābā Dīp Singh was a Jat from Lahore district, a trusted follower of Gurū Gobind Singh who had fought with Bandā in the early years of the century. Both traditions begin with the Afghan invaders who in 1756 had occupied and defiled Harimandir (the Golden Temple). In 1757 Dīp Singh vowed to fight his way to the temple and either evict the foul occupiers or die in its precincts. All who recognised the need were called upon to accompany him and the small army marched on Amritsar, only to be confronted by a much larger host several miles from the city. In the battle which followed, Dīp Singh's head was cut off and at this point the two traditions diverge. One has him fighting on, holding his decapitated head in one hand, until he eventually expired near the temple. In the second tradition he hurls his severed head over the intervening miles and a hexagonal stone in the Golden Temple paving marks the spot where it is said to have landed⁴⁸.

Mehtab Singh

An earlier stalwart of the eighteenth-century Khalsā who was concerned to cleanse Harimandir Sahib from the polluting Muslims was Mehtab Singh. In 1740 Amritsar had been entrusted to the debauched Massa Ranghar and he, sacrilegious scum that he was, had taken up his quarters in the holy temple. The story is here presented by a source which does make attempts to distinguish fact from legend, but normally succeeds in presenting both.

After Abdul Rehman had been killed at Amritsar, one Massa Rangar Mandyalia was appointed as the Kotwal of the city. Massa sat inside the temple, and there, with dancing girls to pacify his passion, and wine to quench his thirst, he defiled the sanctity of the place, where scriptures used to be read and God used to be praised. The blood-curdling details of such deeds reached the Sikhs in their hide-outs, and sent thrills of horror into their nerves. The news of this also reached one Mehtab Singh, who during the days of utter persecutions, having left his village, Miran Kot, near Amritsar, had taken up a service at Bikanir. His spirit revolted within himself, and taking with him Sukha Singh of Kambho Mari, he prepared the steeds and galloped towards Amritsar.

⁴⁸ PSA, pp. 38-39. W.H. McLeod, *Who is a Sikh?*, p. 49.

They purchased a few bags, filled them half with stones and half with coins, and dressing as revenue collectors, presented themselves at the gate of the temple, demanding permission to enter and present the revenue to Massah. The permission was forthwith granted, and the Sikhs entering Massah's presence, made their obeisance. As Massah bent to receive the money, down came a falchion, and like a flash of lightning, Mehtab Singh severed Massa's head from his body, and the two Sikhs rode back brandishing their swords, and leaving behind a mass of terror-stricken attendants and people looking aghast⁴⁹.

The account clearly represents a mingling of historical fact and colourful legend. Massa Ranghar was certainly the kotwal of Amritsar and evidently he did meet his death at Mehtab Singh's hand. The details which give the story its effect are, however, the result of the story's hagiographical presentation. This too is precisely the kind of tale which serves to inspire the Khalsā with the deeds of its eighteenth-century heroes.

It is not difficult to imagine why these stories are so popular today. Bābā Dīp Singh recalls the line from Gurū Nānak which enjoins the loyal disciple to come 'with your head on the palm of your hand'⁵⁰. In like manner loyal Sikhs are urged to come forward, imitating the brave Dīp Singh and fighting for the honour of the Panth against a cunning and unscrupulous enemy. Amritsar, the holiest of the holies, has been assaulted and occupied by a government as mean and as shameless as that of the Mughals. Massa Ranghar is still with us and the Panth cries out for another Mehtab Singh. The heroes and the villains of the eighteenth century are still acting out the same parts. Sikh tradition bears abundant witness to their very visible presence and reinforces yet again the role which hagiography can play in modern Sikh society.

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